

‘Why Should We Take Modern Art and Give It to the Enemy?’

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Introduction

The binary conception of the Cold War in the arts is codified in the opposition of American Abstraction versus Soviet Socialist Realism. Yet, as many scholars and recent studies have pointed out, while this master narrative has wielded significant historical consequences, in actuality the situation was more complex and nuanced. Such complexity can be detected in the modernist debate in Taiwan in the 1960s, exemplified in the essay titled “Why Should We Take Modern Art and Give It to the Enemy?,” published in 1961 in the United Daily News. The essay was written by Liu Kuo-Sung (1932-), who was 29 years old at the time and a member of the newly formed Fifth Moon Art Group (wuyue huahue). The article is a rebuttal to Confucian scholar Xu Fuguan's castigation of Western modern art. Xu lambasted the artistic development from post-impressionism, fauvism, cubism, surrealism to what was considered at the time the climax of modern art--abstraction--as destructive and would only clear the path for Communism. Liu examined Xu's argument point by point in defense of modern art.

With its defeat in the Chinese civil war (1945-49), the KMT in Taiwan implemented strict cultural policies, seeking to establish itself as orthodox China not only in the political sense but also as the rightful heir to the Chinese civilization. However, while the anti-communist message was clear, the KMT did not have a clear visual form in mind that could represent the new, modern, and free China that is now located in Taiwan. The party's operating logic was based on a series of disapprovals and prohibitions. European and American modern art was generally unwelcome, not because of the formal qualities, but due to the leftist political inclinations of many of the artists. For example, Alliance française de Chine in Taipei had to suspend the

exhibition titled “Modern French Paintings” in 1955 because it was reported that Picasso was a communist. Xu’s detestation of modern art was shared by many conservatives. The signing of the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty in 1955 saw a new wave of introduction of Western modern art to Taiwan. The United States Information Service (USIS) promoted American modern art--mainly the abstract expressionists-- and through scholarships and curatorial efforts sought to establish a discursive lineage from European modernism to American art, which inspired mainland artists in Taiwan like Liu, Chuang Che, and Xiao Ching, among others, to start contemplating of the linkage between Chinese art and European modernism. In this essay, we see Liu’s focus on the intersection between Chinese culture and modernism; such a focus would then propel him to turn away from the Western medium of oil and return to traditional Chinese ink and paper.

Often regarded as the father of Chinese ink painting, Liu belongs to the younger generation of mainland Chinese artists who relocated to Taiwan with the KMT in their teens. Their devotion to modernizing Chinese art is often in contrast with Taiwan-born artists of the time. While Taiwanese artists were more or less exposed to Western modernism via Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, they tend to be less concerned with the reconciliation between Chinese and Western culture via abstract form, and most of them were relegated to the cultural periphery. Tainan-born, Tokyo-educated Chucang Shih-Ho (1923-2020), for example, was also avidly advocating modern art and abstraction during the time, though he rarely placed Chinese ink techniques as the main formal strategy to modernize art.

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Possible Pairings

Pan, An-yi. “Modern Taiwan Ink Art: Postwar Internationalism,” Postwar Abstraction
in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, M+ Matters, June 28, 2014.

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Kuo, Jason C. *Art and Cultural Politics in Postwar Taiwan*. Seattle: University of
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Clarke, David. “Abstraction and Modern Chinese Art,” in *Chinese Art and Its
Encounter with the World*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011.

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LIU Kuo-Sung. (1961, August 29). ‘Why Should We Take Modern Art and Give It to the Enemy?’ *United Daily News*.

On August 14, the Hong Kong *Overseas Chinese Daily* published a piece by Prof. Xu Fuguan titled “The Fate of Modern Art.” Three lines of 4 point square black letters followed the title: “Where is modern abstract art heading towards? Modern artists themselves would not raise this question and would probably think those who would ask this question either know nothing about art or want to destroy art.” I have read several articles by Prof. Xu Fuguan. Even though I have yet finished both volumes of *Between Academic and Politics*, I have roughly read all the sections relevant to academic work. I respect Prof. Xu’s erudition and unique perspective immensely. This is the first time I read Prof. Xu’s commentary on modern art; not only is Prof. Xu an expert in politics, literature, and history, he also has researched on art and has his own insights on modern art.

There are several parts in which I, as a humble student, could not understand and would like to consult Prof. Xu. Firstly, the opening, printed in large font, goes: “Where is modern abstract art heading towards? Modern artists themselves would not raise this question.” I wonder where Prof. Xu based this claim on. As a practitioner and researcher on abstract art, my experience and knowledge lead me to hold oppositional opinions.

Even though we are an ancient civilization, none of the histories we learn in school focuses on cultural history but political history. If we turn our attention to cultural history or art history (both Chinese and Western), we will recognize a fact: whether it be new theories in literature or art, or the emergence and establishment of new schools and movements, they all partly spring out of writers and artists’ constantly asking “this kind of question”: where is literature and art (modern abstract art is no

exception) heading towards? If the final result, as Prof. Xu has contended, is only to follow the conventions, then, there will never be new theories, new schools, and of course, there will be no abstract art, let alone the new theories and movements that give rise to abstract art (such as abstract expressionism, spatialism, tachisme, abstract lyricism, art non-figuratif, etc.)

Therefore, I think of the question: where will modern abstract art go? Except for modern artists themselves, what others have proposed is useless to art itself. I wonder what Prof. Xu thinks? Prof. Xu went on to say that: “they [modern artists] would probably think those who would ask this question either know nothing about art or want to destroy art.” I don’t believe this statement came out of ignorance. Prof. Xu did not misunderstand abstract art as Impressionism like most people do, which proves his deep understanding of modern art. Otherwise, his statement is not worthy of all this discussion.

Secondly, in the second paragraph of his article, Prof. Xu quoted Ernst Cassirer’s *An Essay on Man* (1944): “Science is the discovery of the law of nature, and art is to show the image of nature.” Prof. Xu then continued: “Therefore, form is the essence of art. Why should they (artists) want to destroy it?” Is this indicative of Prof. Xu’s view and stance on art? If so, Prof. Xu agrees with the theory that “art is the representation of nature.”

However, Prof. Xu later admitted that “Although the art form comes from nature, the forms in the work actually contain the feelings of the artist and their character. Therefore, it is the crystallization of the subjective and the objective. Thus the form of art is not an imitation but a creation.” This denies the claim that “art is the representation of nature” in favor of understanding “art as a form of creation.” Prof. Xu’s claims are contradictory and without a definite and unified view on art. Does

the so-called “crystallization of the subjective and the objective” as a “form of creation” refer to artists not just imitating forms, but appropriately exaggerating and distorting? If I interpret it correctly, doesn’t this answer his own question of “why do they [artists] want to destroy?”

Because every exaggeration and distortion of form is an effort to destroy, Prof. Xu also cited an example in political history, comparing modern artists to Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, analogizing their process of using abstract methods to destroy form to the uprising that destroys all rules and laws. He thus said: "Therefore, the current modern artists are just gallant outlaws whose mission is the destruction of art; once their work of destruction is completed, their mission is completed: they themselves will too lose the meaning of their existence."

If the modern artists Xu refers to are the Dadaists, then this claim couldn't be more correct. However, according to the previous passage, he is referring to contemporary modern artists, thus, I have enough reason to conceive that Xu is referring to those abstract artists who use the “abstract method.” Then the analogy is not without question.

Let us look at the development of Western art of this century. When the First World War took place in Europe and humans were killing each other, some artists started casting doubts on the values and dominance of Western civilization and started an internal deconstruction of the existing culture; they called themselves the “Dada” movement. However, it did not take long for some artists in the Dada movement to realize that such continual destruction would be in vain, so they launched the Surrealist movement and actively engaged in constructing a new kind of art based on the ruins. Although the form was already destroyed by the Dadaists, Surrealists and subsequent abstract artists pursued new plasticity from the destroying of forms,

creating their own artistic worlds to compete against the natural world created by God. Couldn't Prof. Xu see that modern abstract artists are constantly working to create their own "forms"? I always think it is ridiculous to compare the political phenomenon, in which legitimacy belongs to the victor and the loser is always the outlaw, with the shifting ideas and trends in art.